

Students that Persist: Caring Relationships that Make a Difference in  
Higher Education

Ava S. Miller

June 24, 2007

Student retention continues to receive increasing attention by researchers. Local research efforts enabled us to verify the validity of previous findings with our own population. Many studies have looked at reasons why students leave college. They examine the characteristics of students that do not graduate and seek personal testimony as to why college was not completed.

This study looked at college students that persisted, and graduated, to determine some of the specific characteristics of meaningful relationships. Looking at meaningful relationships, that have made a difference in student retention will help us develop those very relationships that can make a difference.

#### Purpose of Study

Previous studies have revealed that as many as 90% of the graduating students indicated that their school success could be attributed to a relationship with a significant other that influenced them to remain in school. Of these graduates, over half of these significant relationships were with college faculty and staff (Weber, 1999). If success is linked to a relationship, it is important to develop these nourishing relationships. This researcher believes that this relationship mirrors the characteristics of caring relationships. In a previous study, it was found that students perceive faculty as caring along thirteen behavioral dimensions (Miller, 1998).

This study had two goals. The first goal was to determine the extent to which students indicate that at least one significant faculty relationship has made a difference in their ability to persist in school. The second goal was to determine the extent to which the 13 dimensions of caring are identified as characteristics of the relationship.

## Background the Theory

The problem of retaining students in higher education is not new. Theories of how to retain students have been developed, implemented, and evaluated in an effort to define what it is that makes students leave college early.

A foundational model, is the Tinto's integration model of retention. This theory posits that the pre-entry college attributes of a student form individual goals and commitments. The individual's goals and commitments interact over time with institutional experiences. The extent to which the individual becomes academically and socially integrated into the formal and informal academic and social systems of an institution determines the individual's departure decision (Tinto, 1993).

This model has brought forth a variety of strategies and interventions to halt early departure of students. Among the strategies have been orientation programs (Green, 1987), academic counseling (Seidman, 1992), student development projects, assessment programs, developmental courses and remediation programs, and academic support systems (Crockett, 1984; Seidman, 1993).

Another strategy employed by programs are exit interviews that seek answers as to why students depart early in an effort to change aspects of college life that contribute to attrition. Surveys and research studies, involving departing students, have often been aimed at determining why students fail to complete their educational goals.

Armed with data that represents a culmination of survey efforts, colleges set out to improve those areas that departing students contributed to their decision to leave early. One such strategy has been the development of Orientation Programs designed to meet the needs of entering students in such a way that contributes to student success. Other

programs which evolved from both retention models and student research have been Student Success Programs which consist of a Freshman Experience Course (Seidman, 1993).

Currently popular are extensive data collection strategies to identify students at risk for early departure. Data in the form of factors that contribute to early departure might be from standardized risk factors. Other factors include behavioral and scholastic data collected as the student progresses in their college plan of study. Faculty play an important role in identifying students at risk of early departure within most Early Alert type programs.

The focus of most Student Retention Plans has been on preventing the mistakes that have contributed to students departing early. Most student data have come from students that have left school early.

One area that contributes significantly to the research data related to student retention is that which is collected from students that do succeed. Those students who succeed know clearly what made success possible for them. In many cases it is the academic climate and relationships with staff and faculty that create a sense of connection (Johnson, 1997). One research study, that surveyed students, concluded that: Students who reported greater perceived faculty support were more likely to persist than those who withdrew early and to promote retention of student, faculty need to provide the caring atmosphere of a mentoring relationship and direct assistance to facilitate student learning (Shelton, 2003).

There are many facets to the study of the retention of College students. One area of importance is the impact of human connection and caring on a students decision to

stay in school. Among our data on student success, it is important to include students perceptions of what made success possible.

### Students Perceptions of Success

In order to determine what effect human connection has on student success, a study was conducted utilizing students about to graduate. Participants were asked to respond to items related to their perceptions about their own college success.

This study used survey research methodology to identify the existence of a significant faculty relationship and determine the extent to which the student identified that relationship exhibiting behaviors along the 13 dimensions of human caring.

After obtaining Human Subjects Approval, a previously validated Likkert type survey, developed by the researcher, was administered to students who would be receiving their Bachelor's Degree that same spring semester. Enrollment data was provided by computer services indicating there were 208 senior level (four thousand level) courses being delivered during the semester by 130 different faculty members. There were a total of 1584 students enrolled in 4000 level classes. All faculty teaching these courses, received a packet of surveys to administer at their earliest convenience and were provided a return envelope to send the surveys back to the researcher. Of the 208 senior level courses, ninety-three courses were surveyed and returned to the researcher. Of the total pool of respondents, 203 students were scheduled to graduate in the Spring or Summer term.

Of the total pool of respondents, sixty-nine students indicated that there was no significant faculty member that made a difference in their ability to graduate. One

hundred thirty-four students indicated that there was a particular faculty member that made a difference in their ability to graduate.

Demographic data indicated that there were forty-three males, eighty-six females, and five individuals that did not respond. Fifty five students fell into the 18-25 year old category, 72 in the 26-44 category, 4 in the over 44 category and there were three individuals that did not respond. The data also revealed that it took an average of 6.5 years to complete the bachelors degree with a range of 3.5 to 30 years.

Sixty-six percent of the pool of graduating students indicated that there was, at least, one faculty member that made a difference in their ability to graduate. The average response to the thirty survey items was 4.4 with a range of 3.6 to 4.8. The data suggests that a significant number of students feel that there was at least one faculty member that made a difference in their ability to complete their degree and students significantly agree that the individual that made a difference in their ability to graduate demonstrated characteristics along the dimensions of caring.

### Discussion

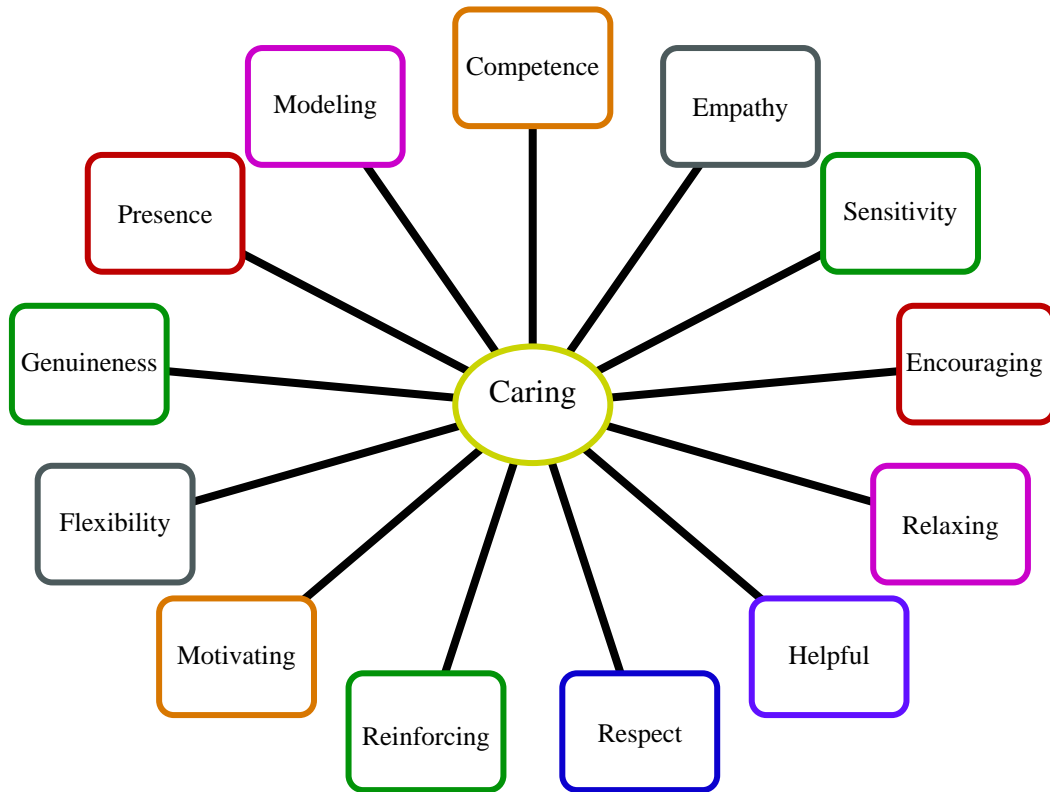
The implications of this research are that those significant faculty relationships are characterized as caring relationships. These are caring relationships that can be developed when we can identify the behaviors that represent caring. Specific behaviors that students identified as characteristic of that one special faculty included: Role modeling, availability outside of class, willing to listen to student, empathy, respect, reinforcing, helpful, flexible, prepared for class, open-minded, a sincere desire to see the student succeed in the class, made the student want to learn, made the student feel

comfortable and was not sarcastic, helpful, gave timely feedback on work submitted, and took time for the student (see Figure 1).

When students wrote about those caring relationships they spoke of faculty who took time for them in a meaningful way. They described a caring presence among those faculty who were concerned about their well being. Some students wrote stories of a time when they wanted to give up and they received encouragement from a faculty member that made them willing to go on. They were able to cross the present hurdle and move closer to their goal of graduation. Students spoke of faculty support when family and work became difficult to juggle with the demands of school.

The findings of this research support the need for faculty to understand the impact of their interactions with students. Faculty development seminars related to student support can be an important addition to the scholarship of teaching within the context of the targeted institution. The long term effect can be increased retention by fostering relationships that nourish students and encourage them to reach their educational goals.

Figure 1: Model of Caring Behaviors





## Bibliography

Crockett, D.S. (1984). Advising skills, techniques, and resources. *Iowa City, Iowa: ACT National Center for the Advancement of Educational Practice.*

Green, E. (1987). At many colleges, orientation has become a serious introduction to campus life. *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 34(6), 41-43.

Johnson, Judith L. (1997). Commuter college students: What factors determine who will persist and who will drop out? *College Student Journal*, 31(3), 323-332.

Miller, A. (1998). The development of an instrument to measure caring and not so caring behaviors among nursing faculty. Unpublished manuscript.

Santos, J., & Reigads, E. (2004-2005). Understanding the student-faculty mentoring process: Its effects on at-risk university students. *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory and Practice*, 6(3), 337-357.

Shelton, E.N. (2003). Faculty support and student retention. *Journal of Nursing Education*, 42(2), 68-76.

Seidman, A. (1992). Integrated admission counseling: Impact on enrollment. *The Freshman Year Experience Newsletter*, 4, 6.

Seidman, A. (1993) Needed: A research methodology to assess community college effectiveness. *Community College Journal*, 63(5), 247-254.

Stevenson, J., Buchanan, D., & Sharpe, A. (2006-2007). Commentary: The pivotal role of the faculty in propelling student persistence and progress toward degree completion. *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory and Practice*, 8(2), 141-148.

Tinto, V. (1993). *Leaving College: Rethinking the causes and cures of student attrition* (2nd ed.). Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Weber, J. (1999). Factors that influence retention. *AMP Grant Paper.*